The Impacts of Competing Narratives on National Consensus in Ethiopia: The Representation of Anole and Adwa

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Abstract: This study investigates how competing historical narratives, particularly surrounding the Adwa victory and Anole episode, contribute to fragmented national identity and political polarization in Ethiopia. The research acknowledges Ethiopia's characteristic competing narratives and lack of national consensus on its history. Understanding these divisive narratives is vital for fostering national unity, building trust, and achieving long-term social and political stability. Adopting an interpretivist-exploratory-qualitative approach and case study design, the study examined the impacts of these narratives. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources through key informant interviews with political party leaders, historians, religious leaders, government officials, and analysts identified via purposive sampling. Field observations and document reviews contextualized and triangulated data. Collected data were sorted, coded, thematically analyzed, and categorized for qualitative presentation. Findings revealed contradictory and conflicting meanings, interpretations, and narratives surrounding the victory of Adwa and the Anole episode. These narratives perpetuate polarized political orientations, scholarship, political conflicts, mutual mistrust, weak state legitimacy, and controversial national identity. Therefore, the study suggests promoting inclusive historiography and revising curriculum (history and ethical/moral education) in Ethiopia. Further suggestions are promoting national dialogue, transitional justice, and reconsidering commemorative sites to foster unity and acknowledge contributions from all groups. Coordinated efforts from historians, politicians, government officials, institutions, and civil society are necessary.

Keywords: Adwa; Anole; Commemoration; Competing narratives; Ethiopia; National consensus

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1. Introduction

National memories and commemorations are very important elements of national narratives which intricately connect the past, the present, and the future of a particular community (Olsen, 2015). Historical memorial monuments and statues, national holidays and festivities, and iconic historic figures are structures upon which historical narratives are established (Kolsto, 2006). The meanings and interpretations of historical monuments, the protocol and the manner of reconstructing historical discourses during celebration of holidays, and the process of selection and commemoration of historical iconic figures are very important manifestations of national narratives which in turn contribute to shaping a given group's collective identity. Memory is an integral part of social and political life which connects the past and the present through self-reflective process called sites of memory that includes monuments, emblems, commemorations, rituals, mottos, and other discursive texts (Humbleback, 2018). These sites of memory lay the foundations of national hegemonic narratives that may, at some point of time in history, be tested and challenged.

Therefore, the sites of memory of national hegemonic narratives may turn into 'sites of conflicts' with changing political, social, and cultural circumstances as national historical narratives may not succeed in hegemonic position; because of the emergence of competing historical narratives and/or critical historiography. Thus, historical narratives, commemorations, and memory sites can become battlegrounds where different interpretations and agendas clash, potentially leading to social division and conflicts across different societies and regions (Rusu, 2014; Manojlovic, 2010; Smith, 2009; Binder, 2004). In such circumstances, confronting and addressing difficult aspects of history in a way that promotes understanding, reconciliation, and acknowledgment of past wrongdoings would be crucial.

The aforementioned cases indicate that consensual/shared national commemorations and memorization of a community's past contribute towards the writing of inclusive and stable national narratives which are significantly enhancing national identity and nation-building (Smith, 1986). However, when the national narratives and cultural projection of a nation are no longer convincing to many; there is no consensus on the cultural traditions, commemoration of historical events, iconic figures, rituals, and historical experiences; nation failure becomes real since competing and conflicting narratives may lead to inter-group violence and civil war (Bogdandy, Häußler, Hanschmann, and Utz, 2005).

Ethiopian historiography is largely shaped by biblical-Jewish traditions, Aksumite-Ge'ez civilization, and texts like *Kebre Negest* and *Fetha Negest* (Tibebu, 1996 Erlich, 1994). The propagation of national historical narratives involves various entities including the state, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, arts, literature, media, and education (Tamrat, 1972). The dominance of Semitic, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean influences in Abyssinian historiography has somewhat overshadowed the historical and cultural contributions of northeast African and broader African communities to Ethiopia's unique identity as an African nation (Adejumobi, 2007; Tibebu, 1996).

Since the creation of Ethiopia as a modern state, the country's national identity, nation-building policies, and national narratives have been greatly influenced by the Abyssinian narratives (Ethiopian Grand National Narratives). Several national and expatriate intellectuals as well as politicians strongly criticized the Grand National narrative not only for its exclusivist stance but also for its distortion and denigrations of the history of various nationalities and cultural groups in the country, leading to marginalization and suppression of the non-Abyssinian i.e., mostly non-Amhara and Tigrayans values, customs, cultural traditions, ways of life, and generally, ethno-national identities (Jalata, 1998; Tibebu, 1995).

Consequently, intellectuals and politicians, mostly from the southern parts of the country, publicly rejected the Ethiopia's hegemonic national narratives and national identity since the 1960s (Jalata, 1998; Bulcha, 1996). Hence, counter-hegemonic narratives emerged and have been in play since the 1960s, but no inclusive and consensual national narrative has been developed so far in the country (Clapham, 2006). Even if efforts have been made to reform the country's national identity since the

1974 social revolution (Gudina, 2003), elements of the Grand National narratives have continued to substantially affect the socio-political and cultural relations between various groups in the country. Hence, intellectual debates and political contradictions have continued to negatively affect inter-group relations, nation-building, and peacebuilding in Ethiopia.

Competing narratives emerge when multiple, often contradictory, accounts or interpretations of events, situations, or historical phenomena exist. These differing viewpoints are actively shaped by underlying power structures and ongoing contestation, influencing both how these narratives are constructed and how they are promoted (Bourdieu, 1990; Spivak, 1988; Said, 1978; Foucault, 1972). In contrast, national consensus describes a widespread agreement or shared understanding within a nation regarding its history, values, and goals (Durkheim, 1993; Smith, 1991; Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983). This type of consensus is often considered crucial for maintaining social cohesion and fostering national unity (Lipset, 1960; Parsons, 1938). In Ethiopia, the absence of such consensus is particularly evident when examining how different groups interpret pivotal historical events.

Among the several conflicting narratives, the competing and/or conflicting narratives surrounding the victory of the Battle of Adwa and its national commemoration as well as contradictory interpretations of the Anole martyrs' memorial monument, are subjects deserving due intellectual and policy attention. The Battle of Adwa, a significant victory for Ethiopia against Italian colonial forces in 1896, is a highly celebrated event in Ethiopian history, but its meaning and commemoration have become a source of intense controversy as various groups interpret its legacy differently. The celebration of the Adwa victory, once a consistent feature under Emperor Haile Selassie I (HS I) and the *Dergue* regime, saw a decline during the rule of the Tigray People's Liberation Front-led Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (TPLF/EPRDF). However, it has regained significant official attention under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government since 2018, but this has ignited intense debates over its interpretation and significance.

Contrasting with the victory at Adwa is the Anole episode-a tragic event that also carries a significant historical weight and differing interpretations. While Anole is a site of deep grief and remembrance for some groups, it can be understood in quite different terms by others. The intellectual and media debates around the historical monuments of Anole and the victory at Adwa clearly reveal the impact of competing narratives on inter-group political, cultural, and symbolic relations. Conflicting narratives on these subjects have significant implications for nation-building and peaceful coexistence in Ethiopia. Hence, the aim of this article is to discuss the impacts of competing and/or conflicting narratives on national consensus by considering views around the Adwa victory and the Anole tragedy on inter-group relations and nation-building in Ethiopia. The victory of Adwa commemoration and Anole massacre memorial monument were selected as case studies due to their distinct yet equally powerful symbolism in the Ethiopian collective memory, representing contrasting historical experiences and generating ongoing debates that expose deep-seated divisions.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Research Approach and Design

The study employed constructivist theory to analyze how social interactions within Ethiopia's socio-cultural, political, and historical process shape concepts and symbols. This analysis reveals the construction of grand national narratives and counter-narratives, which have challenged efforts to achieve national consensus in Ethiopia.

This study employs an interpretivist-exploratory approach recognizing that social realities are constructed through human interpretation and meaning-making (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), to understand the subjective meanings, interpretations, and narratives surrounding the Adwa victory and the Anole episode. An exploratory qualitative approach was essential, allowing for flexibility and the discovery of previously unknown aspects of the complex relationships between contested narratives, political polarization, and national identity.

The study, therefore, adopted a case design that permits an in-depth investigation of the bounded cases of Adwa and Anole within their respective socio-political and historical contexts. The inherent flexibility of a case study, coupled with a qualitative approach that favors diverse data collection methods, such as in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis (Merriam, 1998) enables a rich and holistic understanding of the phenomenon while allowing for an iterative research process where findings inform and shape the ongoing investigation thereby providing a comprehensive view of the dynamics at play.

2.2. Sampling Strategy

The study employed purposive sampling to target influential individuals, including politicians, researchers/intellectuals, religious leaders, government officials, and social activists who have a significant impact on the political and social landscape of the broader population. As a result, the study conducted interviews with fourteen (14) key informants from different regions of the country.

The pool of the fourteen key informants presents a notable ethnic and religious diversity. The Oromo ethnic group constitutes the largest portion at 43%, followed by Amhara at 29%, and Tigray at 14%, while both Gurage and Benishangul communities are represented by a smaller 7% each. In terms of religion, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians form the majority at 50%, with Protestants comprising 21%, and Muslims and *Waaqeffataa* each accounting for 14% of the informant group.

The ethnic composition of the key informants closely aligns with the 1994 Ethiopian census reflecting the nation's diversity with Oromo comprising the largest group (43%), followed by Amhara (29%), and Tigrayan (14%), and smaller representations from Gurage and Benishangul (Central Statistical Agency [CSA], 1994). This suggests a strong effort to capture the proportional ethnic distribution within the informant pool.

On the other hand, the religious representation among the informants deviates slightly from national trends. While Ethiopian Orthodox Christians are overrepresented at 50%, compared to the national figure of 43%, Muslims, who make up 34% of the population, are underrepresented at 14% among the informants (CSA, 1994). This deviation stems from the study's focus on ethnic diversity and the complex link between ethnicity and religion in Ethiopia, rather than aiming to proportionally represent religious affiliations. The data indicate that ethnicity was a primary focus which indirectly affected the religious representation in the selection of key informants.

2.3. Method of Data Collection

The study used both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected through conducting in-depth interviews and field observations. Key informant data were collected from researchers, government officials, political party leadership, and CSO's leaders. The study also utilized secondary sources of data such as books, policy reports, political party programs and manifestos, journal articles, dissertations, discourses accessible via various media platforms. These data were critically examined and analyzed qualitatively.

2.4. Methods of Data Analysis

This study used qualitative analysis to interpret the collected data. The analysis included content analysis to identify thematic patterns using conceptual coding and relational mapping. Discourse analysis examined how narratives were constructed, contested, and utilized within specific socio-political contexts. Techniques like frame analysis, narrative structure analysis, critical discourse analysis, and rhetorical analysis were used to understand the narratives and their wider social and political implications.

In order to ensure the credibility of this study, the researcher adopted multi-method while collecting the data. In relation to this, the researcher made intra-triangulation – triangulation within a qualitative paradigm – to check the quality of analytical data obtained through various instruments. The study acknowledges that the insider status of the researcher as a member of the Ethiopian community may

reasonably influence the research process and findings. To address these possible biases, the researcher employed strategies such as reflexivity, seeking diverse viewpoints, and maintaining rigorous analytical processes to ensure that interpretations were data-driven rather than influenced by personal beliefs.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Conflicting Narratives on the Anole Incidence

One of the most sensitive issues in Ethiopia's historiography and politics is the Anole incidence.[1] The Anole Memorial Center is located in the present Hetosa District of Arsi Zone in the Oromia region. According to Oromia Bureau of Culture and Tourism, the Anole Memorial Monument was raised/erected as a tribute to the Arsi Oromo victims who were massacred by Emperor Menelik II's general *Ras* Darge during his forceful expansion to the territory in 1887 (OCTB, 2022). In Afan Oromo, the monument is often called *Siidaa yaadannoo harka muraafi harma muraa Aanolee*, which is literally translated as "The Memorial Monument for the Hand and Breast Amputation of Anole" that the center was established to memorize the injustice and crimes of amputating male's right hands and female's breasts made by Emperor Menelik II's uncle *Ras* Darge against the Arsi Oromo victims (KI-3, 01/03/22).

However, there have been debates among Ethiopian politicians, historians, and political activists on the historical interpretations and meanings arising from the Anole historical incidence. At the front of this narrative, found the Amhara elites, who are very sensitive to the meaning that the monument conveys. One of the key informants argued that "Anole monument is just a result of a mere anti-Amhara narrative developed after the coming to power of TPLF/EPRDF" (KI-6, 09/03/22). On one hand, there is a tendency to criticize the Anole narrative as a fictitious stuff (Tolossa, 2015); while on the other, it seems, there is a meaning that even if it might have happened, it is wrong to erect such a monument. In both ways, it is understood that there is a tendency to deny the Anole historical incidence and the subsequent rejection of the Anole Memorial Monument.

In this claim, the findings revealed that what is narrated to have happened during the battle of Anole like the amputation of limbs, hands, and breasts did not exist in the Amhara cultural traditions (Tolossa, 2015). Meaning, the Amhara in general and Emperor Menelik II in particular, did not commit such crimes and injustices to the Arsi people. This argument is also similar to the aforementioned claim that Anole massacre is a sort of fiction. In the words of Fikre Tolossa:

> We did not commit Anole massacre, it is not our culture and character to amputate limb, hand, and breast. Amputation of hands, limbs, and breasts is the punishment codes of the Arabs and Islamic sharia laws. The monument was intended to teach generations about the Amharas chauvinism and oppression. I am sure; Emperor Menelik II did not do that. He was merciful and charitable (Tolossa, 2015: 153).

According to the aforementioned claims, the Anole massacre (and war crimes and crimes against humanity resulted from) has no historical base; and, therefore, the Anole incidence is a fiction, unnecessary, and dangerous stuff for harmonious and peaceful relationships between Amhara and Oromo people. Therefore, there is a clear demand that the monument must be demolished.

On the contrary, the findings from the side of Oromo elites revealed that the Anole Memorial Monument represents one of the numerous incidences at which the Amhara-Menelikan forces massacred the Oromos when they were heroically resisting being subjugated by the former (KI-11, 10/03/22; KI-3, 01/03/22; KI-2, 28/02/22). There have also been several researches conducted and published about the real historical occurrence of the Anole massacre (Daba, 2017; Bulcha, 1996; Hassan, 1996; Haji, 1982, for example). Not only the mere historical happening of the heavy fight between the forces of Menelik II and the Arsi Oromo at the battle named after this historical site, researchers and historians have established evidences with regard to the bloody and inhuman nature of

[1] The Battle of Azule took place in 1887 between the advancing forces of King Menelik, led by *Ras* Darge, and the resisting Arsi Oromo (Bahru, 1994).

the war (Haji, 2014; Bulcha, 1996). Therefore, the Amhara elites' hostile interpretations to Anole Memorial Monument have been countered by the Oromo elite in a tone not more friendly than the former.

According to one of the key informants, the idea of demolishing the Anole memorial monument is part of the mission of Grand National Narratives (KI-3, 10/03/22). This implies that the idea of demolishing the Anole memorial monument stems from the Ethiopia's Solomonic-Amhara dominant national narratives which have influenced Ethiopian historiography to date. The attempt of erasing the Anole historical incidence from Ethiopian history indicates the legitimate claim of continuity for the Solomonic-Amhara's imagined statehood. Therefore, the idea of demolishing or removing the Anole memorial statue is rarely acceptable by the Oromo political elites and historians. Amputation of hands and breasts as punishment is one of the peculiar features in Abyssinian-Ethiopian traditions that have survived in Ethiopia (Steyn, 2019; Ali, 2018; Tamrat, 1972). Hence, Fikre Tolossa's attempts to repudiate the occurrence of cutting of limbs/hands of males and breasts of female during the Anole incidence are far from convincing.

The *Oro-mara*[2] platform is one of the favorable play grounds manipulated by the Amhara political elites and historians to persuade their Oromo counter-parts that "the Anole monument is the result of the sponsored fake narratives designed to escalate hostilities and conflicts between the Oromo and Amhara people" (KI-20, 10/01/23). There were several efforts and pressures aimed at reversing the already established narratives of Oromo elite vis-à-vis Amharas in Ethiopia's history under the guise of *Oro-mara* narratives during the 2018's political change in the country. Of course, the *Oro-mara* movement was orchestrated by the then Oromo Democratic Party's (ODP) top leaders, including the current Prime Minister of FDRE Dr. Abiy Ahmed. It was during this time that Mr. Addisu Arega, the then ODP's Chairman, addressed the public on the famous novel *Yeburqa Zemeta* written by Tefaye Gebreab[3] that:

> The novel contains dangerous contents and fake narratives which are deliberately designed to escalate the already hostile relationships between the Amhara and Oromo peoples, portraying the former as enemy of the latter. (…). The novel was sponsored by the TPLF officials in order to maintain their political interests through 'divide and rule' policy (Kebede, 2022: 67).

Anole is one of the main characters appeared in the *Yeburqa Zemeta* novel. As mentioned earlier, the *Oro-mara* movement was endorsed and supported by the majority of ODP's top officials as well as sizable number of Oromo active politicians due to the badly demanded removal of the TPLF led EPRDF government from power. However, Mr. Addisu had to face dangerous public reactions for what he indicated; Anole is a result of 'dangerous fake narratives.' It seems that, Mr. Addisu had never expected such a public blaze would encounter him.

Consequently, Mr. Addisu's comments about the subject had immediately gone viral on both social and mainstream media, resulting in a serious condemnation of Mr. Addisu by the large public to the extent of organizing demonstration on the streets. Eventually, Mr. Addisu was forced to publicly apologize for his speech, albeit, by improving his earlier speech and telling the public that his statements were taken out of the context and misinterpreted (Kebede, 2022). Whatever the case, this scenario provides a clear proof that no one could easily reverse the Oromo's narrative of Anole as well as its interpretations. Although the euphoria that attended the political change in 2018 made it necessary to form *Oro-mara* alliance, this alliance remained ephemeral as long as the Oromo and Amhara elites espouse contradictory and conflicting narratives that are deep rooted in Ethiopian history.

To sum up, giving a due recognition for the past injustices perpetrated by a group against the other(s) contributes to developing mutual trust, respect, and harmonious relations among groups sharing common vision and destiny. But, such an idea is not easy to materialize in Ethiopia where

[2] The term '*Oro-mara'* was used to promote the alliance and collaboration between Oromo and Amhara elites in opposition to the TPLF from 2017 to 2018.

[3] Tesfaye Gebreab. 2000. *Yeburqa Zimita* (Burqa's Silence). Addis Ababa: Mega Publishing Enterprise.

political elites, historians, and activists in social media shy-away from recognizing the past mistakes that were committed by the Ethiopian emperors. This is the realty the country is facing currently where deep societal division is on the high threatening the very survival of the state. That's why the Anole memorial monument has remained a bone of contention.

Even if the Amhara politicians and historians claim that a memorial monument like Anole has no significance than inflicting hostilities and inter-group conflicts (KI-20, 10/01/22; KI-6, 09/03/22; KI-5, 09/03/22), it appears that they are not yet ready to concede and lay down a new structure of socio-political concord. They tend to deny what had really happened in the past with the view to legitimize the Grand Narrative and ensure the continuity of its legacy so that they can still play the dominant role in the contemporary political landscape. This may be the reason why they have been engaged in re-writing history by sticking to the old paradigm and historiography of the dominant narratives (Tolossa, 2015). The dichotomous expressions of 'the monument is dangerous' versus 'the denial is fatal' by the Amhara and Oromo elites, respectively, have continued to affect inter-group relations between Oromo and Amhara elites in Ethiopia.

Figure 1: The Anole Massacre Memorial Monument
Source: Advocacy for Oromia (2022)

3.2. Competing Narratives on the Victory of Adwa and its Commemoration

The meaning and interpretations of the victory of Adwa are divergent and, often, contradictory among political elites, scholars, and government officials. The first elite narrative divergence begins with the ownership of the victory of Adwa. In this regard, there are competing and/or contradictory narratives; especially among the Tigrayan, Amhara, and Oromo elites. This section is devoted to exploring contradictions, and discussing how those competing narratives impacted nation-building and peaceful coexistence among the groups in Ethiopia.

3.2.1. The Tigrayan narrative of Adwa

The Tigrayan elites strongly claim that the Tigrayans had played a decisive role in the battle of Adwa both in terms of participation and military leadership. Against this narrative, however, they argue that

their roles during the battle were distorted in state narratives and in Ethiopian historiography. There were arguments that the role of the Tigrayans was undermined deliberately since the Amharas assumed that it would not promote the kind of nation-building project they designed to carry out in the post-Menelikan period. In the words of one of the key informants:

> The Tigrayans were the ones who played the principal role during the battle of Adwa, to be followed by the Wollo Oromos. It was upon the request of *Ras*[4] Alula Aba Nega that King Muhammed Ali of Wollo mobilized cavalries that blocked the roads against the Italians. (…) When the battle was fought early in the morning, Emperor Menelik II was praying at the church. Empress Taitu Bitul is an ethnic-Tigrayan by her father's side and an Oromo through her mother; she was a Tigrayan, not an Amhara. The Tigrayan contributions through historical figures are deliberately ignored and excluded from the public discourses as the Amharas thought that it would not be relevant to the kind of the nation-building project that was undertaken by the Amhara elites (KI-21, 22/05/23).

According to the informant's statement, there were communications between the Tigrayan *Ras* Alula Aba Nega and *Negus* (King) Muhammed Ali (Michael) of Wollo about the course of the battle thereby making Emperor Menelik II a passive participant. In terms of the magnitude of contributions, the Tigrayans were considered the principal role players while the Oromos stood next to them. According to the narrative of this informant, the battle of Adwa mainly covered the geographical areas of Tigray and Wollo to be followed by Shewa, Gojjam and Gonder, whereas the contributions of peoples from the southern Ethiopian territories were considered insignificant during the battle. Likewise, this narrative reduces the roles of the Amhara as it considered them not active participant in the battle by alluding to Empress Taitu Bitul who was considered an ethnic-Tigrayan, and her role is not to be considered part of Amhara's history.

There are also other evidences that the contributions of the Tigrayans in the battle of Adwa are significant, emphasizing on the roles of key figures such as *Ras* Alula Aba Nega, *Ras* Mangesha Yohannes, and Empress Taitu Bitul (Abbay, 2022; KI-1, 06/06/22). The story in the aforementioned statements point out the marginalization of the Tigrayan in historical narratives, suggesting that their contributions have been overlooked in favor of nation-building efforts by the Amhara.

On the other hand, there is an argument that the Tigrayan; especially *Ras* Alula Aba Nega had committed betrayal against Ethiopia by collaborating with Italians (KI-20, 10/01/23). A notable Ethiopian historian, Bahru Zewdie did not mention *Ras* Alula Aba Nega when he commented the important role played by *Ras* Mangesha Yohannes (KI-4, 05/03/22). Bahru took a medium tone on the roles that the Tigrayan played in the battle by stating that they played their part in providing information during the battle and giving support from behind by providing food to the Ethiopian troops together with other Ethiopian compatriots (KI-4, 05/03/22).

3.2.2. The Amhara narratives of Adwa

There is the Amhara narrative of Adwa which is dominantly focused on the personal achievements of Emperor Menelik II. Proponents of Amhara narratives of Adwa tend to centralize their arguments on the extraordinary and unique historical achievements Emperor Menelik II scored due to his exceptional leadership skill. An informant who is the proponent of this narrative stated the following:

> A leader may be a dictator or a tyrant; but he deserves a due credit for his achievements. Emperor Menelik was a great leader who made the victory of Adwa possible. So, it is unacceptable to downgrade his greatness by attaching his name to the 'Anole Massacre' (KI-6, 09/03/22).

It can be interpreted that no matter how Emperor Menelik II might have done wrong in many other respects, it is impossible to deny his greatness with regard to the victory of Adwa. The informant reflected his views that the narrative surrounding the Anole massacre is deliberately done in order to erode the great contribution of the emperor. There are many other groups and even regional media which advanced such position and established the emperor's glory and sacrosanctity.

[4] *'Ras'* refers to the highest traditional military title in Abyssinia and, later on, Ethiopia.

The Amhara narrative of Adwa also emphasized Emperor Menelik II's connection with the Solomonic dynasty. In commemorating the 127th year anniversary of the victory of Adwa on March 1st of the year 2023, the Amhara Media Corporation (AMCO) posted on its official webpage, a poem that venerated Emperor Menelik II for his victory over the Italians at the battle of Adwa. The excerpts from the post read, "ባቡሩ ሰገረ፣ ስልኩም ተነገረ፤ ምንልክ መልዓክ ነዉ፣ ልቤ ጠረጠረ፤ (Literally translated as 'The train moved, the phone has talked; Menelik is an angel, my heart has suspected" (AMCO, March 01, 2023).

Furthermore, the Amhara narrative of Adwa has manifested itself as a Christian victory. Some Orthodox clergies and artists advance this view. For instance, Tewodros Kassahun (often known as Teddy Afro), who is a popular singer in Ethiopia, is known for adoring and praising Solomonic emperors. In his popular music album named '*Tikur Sew*,' released in the year 2012, Tewodros ascribes Emperor Menelik II's extraordinary victory over the Italians to the prayer that he made and the intercession of St. Mary by stating in Amharic '*በማሪያም ስለ ማለ'* (Kassahun, 2017). This narrative ignores the real stories by silencing the contributions of the Muslims and followers of traditional religions towards the victory of Adwa.

The proponents of the Amhara narrative tend to reject and took negatively any criticism that can challenge the role of Emperor Menelik II in relation to the victory of Adwa. In so doing, they point their fingers at those politicians and historians from Oromo, Tigray, and other Amhara elites who engaged in counter-narratives (KI-6, 09/03/22; KI-5, 09/03/22). The proponents of the Amhara narrative pushed their narrative to the extreme end by stating that 'Adwa means Menelik and Menelik means Adwa,'- an exclusionist narrative that may not contribute anything to the collective memory of all Ethiopians. Such a narrative, which seems to dwell in a big man's theory at the expense of the mass, may not contribute to the collective memory of all Ethiopians and a common narrative towards consensus building.

3.2.3. Oromo narrative of Adwa

With regard to participation and the contribution of the Oromo to the victory of Adwa, there is no significant difference among the Oromo elites. Oromo scholars, politicians, and activists, all have recognized the crucial role played by the Oromo cavalry and infantry forces and the heroism they displayed in the battle of Adwa for the eventual victory (KI-3, 01/03/22; KI-12, 15/04/22; KI-13, 27/04/22). However, there are substantial differences among the Oromo elites on the interpretation and meaning of the victory of Adwa for the Oromo people. Regarding this, there are two categories of Oromo elites. The first category tends to concentrate on the participation and contribution of the Oromo people to the victory of Adwa while ignoring the far-reaching consequences that Adwa had brought upon the Oromo people (KI-12, 15/04/22; KI-13, 27/04/22). The discourse of the incumbent government falls in this category of elites (KI-2, 28/02/22, KI-14, 12/05/22).

The first group of Oromo elites tends towards reinterpreting the Amhara narrative of Adwa through revealing the genuine historical facts in relation to the role of the Oromo during the battle of Adwa. In this position, celebration and commemoration of the victory of Adwa is necessary, but in line with the perspective and the narratives of the Oromo. However, this interpretation of the victory of Adwa was not welcomed by the Amhara politicians; especially by the polarized forces. For example, disagreements which eventually culminated in inter-group violent clashes in the city of Addis Ababa have arisen on the site of commemoration between the Amhara and the non-Amhara, mainly the Oromo, government officials during the last three consecutive years (KI-9, 26/05/22; KI-7, 27/06/22).

The second category of the Oromo elites, however, focused on the implication and consequences of the battle and victory of Adwa for Oromo rather than the real stories about the Oromo's role and contribution to the victory. This group of elites advanced counter-narrative that is based on Emperor Menelik II's controversial position and those paradoxes of state-society relations that emerged in the post-Menelik II period in Ethiopia (KI-3, 01/03/22). Although it is the contribution of the conquered

people of the south that made possible the Adwa victory, it is the very same victory to which they contributed much that brought all the negative consequences upon them (Kasim, 2019). Hence, even if the decisive role played by the Oromo people in achieving the victory of Adwa is recognizable, their role had contributed to legitimizing the conquering Ethiopian empire in the making, because Emperor Menelik II was positioned as a conquering monarch.

In the same vein, Safia (2018: 2) argues that "the victor state was a colonizing state itself." This implies that, there had been colonial relations that existed between the conquered peoples who contributed to the victory of Adwa and the conquering state led by Emperor Menelik II. The battle of Adwa was fought between the two competing colonial empires over the fate of black peoples (Ararsa, 2016). Therefore, as some argued, the Oromo people, as a colonial subject, should not claim the victory of their colonial empire; they should not share victory of their colonizing/conquering emperor (Safia, 2018). In support of this view, Gamedze and Ayalew (2021) stated that the victory of Adwa resulted in the consolidation of an exploitative, hierarchical, and oppressive imperial state – the emergence of Ethiopian Christian-Amhara nationalism – thereby excluding various nationalities and religious groups in Ethiopia.

Of course, the recent extravagant veneration of Emperor Menelik II in relation to his achievements of Adwa is intended to display and prove moral superiority over others using him as a political-historic capital (KI-9, 26/05/22). This might have provoked other peoples to develop counter-discourses and actions, which eventually contributed to inter-group tensions, mutual suspicions, and violent clashes in Addis Ababa between the government forces and the Amhara protesters organized and masterminded by *Balderas*[5], for example (Personal observation, March 01/2022).

Furthermore, there is an argument that the Amhara narrative of Adwa could not be situated in the context of African history of anti-colonial struggle for freedom (Gamedze and Ayalew, 2021). The Menelikan-Amhara narrative of Adwa is a 'search for the exceptional or an isolate' achievement which succumbs to the orientalist traditions that 'Ethiopia became victorious because Ethiopia was less African' (Tibebu, 1996; Gamedze and Ayalew, 2021). Thus, the narrative that surrounds the victory of Adwa has been paradoxical both in terms of the African context and the domestic situation.

3.2.4. Commemoration of Adwa: Conflict over the site

With regard to commemorating the victory of Adwa, there have been divisions and conflicts among politicians on one hand, and between politicians and the wider public on the other hand. Even though, it is argued that post-1991 historiographical change has shifted the memorizations of Adwa which in turn resulted in the reduction of the role of Emperor Menelik II and Amhara (Triulzi, 2003), the Menelikan-Amhara narrative of Adwa has come back since 2018. During the last three years, the site and content of commemoration of the victory of Adwa have become the bone of contention.

The commemoration of the historic Adwa victory brings about crucial considerations regarding the inclusive portrayal of this pivotal event within Ethiopian history. The insights from key informants vividly illustrate the necessity of developing inclusive narratives, historiography, symbolism, and commemorative protocols that truly recognize the collective contributions of all Ethiopian nations, nationalities, and peoples to this significant victory (KI-1, 06/06/22; KI-9, 26/05/22; KI-4, 05/03/22; KI-20, 10/06/22; KI-13, 27/04/22). It is evident that while many believe in the collective nature of Adwa's triumph, there remains a disparity in the interpretive and symbolic representations of this historical event, particularly between Amhara and non-Amhara narratives.

[5] *Balderas*, short for "Balderas for True Democracy," is an Ethiopian political party that identifies with the far-right. It promotes a civic-nationalist vision for the country, strongly opposes the current system of multi-cultural/multi-national federalism, and rejects the existing Ethiopian constitution (Balderas, 2020). Founded by Eskinder Nega, Balderas became a notable voice, particularly in Addis Ababa, and participated in the 2020 Ethiopian federal election. However, the party has encountered significant challenges within the current political environment, especially since its influential founder and leader joined the armed rebellion known as 'Fano' in the Amhara region.

The findings of the study, underline the importance of recognizing and symbolically representing the Oromo's crucial role for the victory of Adwa. The call for the erection of memorial statues for the Oromo; particularly emphasizing their cavalry, stands as a powerful assertion of the significance of their contribution to this transformative event in Ethiopian history (KI-20, 10/06/22). Similarly, the emphasis on the symbolic representation of Muslims in the Adwa narrative reflects the need to acknowledge the diverse and collective efforts that shaped the outcome of this historic battle (KI-9, 26/05/22). The commemorations organized by the Oromia National Regional Government, including cavalry demonstrations, lucidly indicate a step towards recognizing and honoring the pivotal role played by the Oromo people in the Adwa victory (Personal Observation, March 01/2021). However, the commemorative narratives remain contested and require further work to create inclusive and widely accepted versions.

There are political elites and politicians who strongly support the commemoration and the anniversary celebration of the victory of Adwa at Emperor Menelik II square where the emperor's memorial statue is raised (KI-7, 27/06/22; KI-5, 09/03/22). This is based on the Menelikan narrative of Adwa. Even, several cabinet members of Addis Ababa City Administration have opposed to the city government's decision to shift the site of commemoration from Menelik II square (or St. George Church site) to Adwa Bridge. One of our informants accused the government of lack of political interests or lack of knowledge [6] in changing the site (KI-3, 01/03/22). People in this category argue the rationale for their position that 'Menelik II is a symbol of the triumph.'

Nevertheless, there are politicians and activists who strongly support the commemoration of the victory at the Adwa Bridge (KI-13, 27/04/22; KI-2, 28/02/22). People in this category interpret Adwa Bridge as a symbol/memory of collective determination of Ethiopians on their march to the battle of Adwa ((KI-13, 27/04/22). Therefore, the collective narratives of Adwa are reflected at this site. Official site of celebration for commemoration anniversaries has been at the Adwa Bridge. Hence, the celebration of the Adwa victory commemoration day at Menelik II Square is not inclusive (KI-13, 27/04/22).

It is evident that these discussions surrounding the commemoration of the Adwa victory and the choice of sites for celebration are reflective of a larger conversation about the inclusive representation of historical narratives and the need to foster unity and mutual understanding among diverse groups within Ethiopia. This dialogue prompts important considerations about the role of historical sites in commemorative practices and the significance of these locations in representing collective achievements and historical narratives. It also raises questions about the intersection of federal and local regulations in guiding the commemoration of historical events and the need for a cohesive and inclusive approach to these practices.

The incumbent Prosperity Party and the government supported the commemoration of the victory of Adwa at the Adwa Bridge in the way celebrating the anniversary in inclusive narratives suggesting that the previous ways of commemorating the victory of Adwa were non-inclusive and disorganized. Hence, the government is trying to reconstruct both the narratives and memorizations of the victory of Adwa. On the event of celebrating the 127th years Anniversary of the Victory of Adwa in 2023, on behalf of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), the Minister of Culture and Sports, Mr. Qejela Merdasa revealed to the media that:

> The commemoration of the victory of Adwa has been celebrated in a way that it does not deserve. The commemoration of the anniversary of the victory of Adwa should be led by a leadership it deserves. The victory of Adwa is a fruit of the struggle of nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia; but it has been celebrated at different places by different bodies without being centralized. (…). It is a national event that deserves a due care and celebration and upon which the future generations must be built (Merdasa, March 02/2023, Walta TV).

[6] One respondent, KI-7, claimed the existence of a proclamation on the protocol of celebrating the commemorative anniversary of the victory of Adwa, but the researcher could not find it.

The Minister's public speech demonstrates the premium values that the victory of Adwa has for all Ethiopian peoples. But, the manner by which the previous commemoration events were led and organized did not consider the significance of both the victory and its memorization processes for all nationalities in Ethiopia. This is evident that the incumbent government is trying to shift the previous dominant narrative of Adwa to the inclusive ones to better serve the nation-building process, but still has faced challenges from the latter.

Furthermore, the government recognized the presence of distorted narratives and wrong propagations on the victory of Adwa which led certain groups to boost the victory as if it belongs only to them in a way that seems to deny the collective ownership, values and shared representation to this decisive historical project. To quote the public speech of the aforementioned Minister:

> Those peoples who could not find evidences for the heroes of their for-fathers have been bystanders to the victory; some others, however, insisted and followed rhetoric that 'history is made by the peoples, but told in the name of kings' in order to make the victory of certain groups. Therefore, we need to overcome such narratives so that the victory of Adwa be used for building a nation (Merdasa, March 02/2023, Walta TV).

However, Menelik II square has been attended by the public and some interested officials as a resistance to the government's decision to shift the site to the Adwa Bridge. Adwa's Collective achievements need to be interpreted in inclusive narratives. But, regional governments decided to celebrate based on their contexts. For example, Oromia tend to symbolize on the Oromos Cavalry and National heroes of Adwa like Balcha Safo and Gebeyehu Gurmu, nothing to do with Menelik II.

The paradoxical nature of the divergent narratives pertaining to the victory of Adwa demonstrates that rather than uniting the Ethiopian peoples, this pivotal historical event has at times served to divide various cultural and national communities in Ethiopia. The monumentalization of the Adwa victory and the subsequent interpretations of its consequences have led to divisions among different cultural and national communities throughout Ethiopia. These divisions are apparent among the Tigrayan and Amhara elites, the Tigrayans and Oromo elites, the Amhara and Oromo elites, as well as between Muslim and Christian Ethiopians. These divisions underline the multifaceted and intricate nature of historical narratives, demonstrating how interpretations of significant historical events can intersect with contemporary cultural, political, and social dynamics leading to contentious and often divisive interpretations.

Figure 2: Picture of the Battle of Adwa
Source: www.alamy.com

3.3. Impacts of the Competing Narratives on National Consensus in Ethiopia

The preceding discussion has highlighted the divergent narratives surrounding the Adwa victory and the Anole memorial. This section explores the significant impacts of these competing narratives on national consensus in Ethiopia. The study identifies six key impacts of competing narratives. These impacts include political polarization, inter-group mistrust, challenges to state legitimacy, a contested national identity, obstacles to social cohesion, and influence on historical scholarship. By examining these interconnected consequences, this discussion illuminates the profound challenges facing Ethiopia as it strives to reconcile its complex past and build a more unified future.

The study reveals that competing narratives around Adwa and Anole create polarized viewpoints, actively promoting specific interpretations at the expense of others, which fuels political divisions. This aligns with Halbwachs' (1992) assertion that memory is a social construct serving present needs. As one key informant (KI-5, 09/03/22) stated, "the government promotes Adwa as a Pan-Ethiopian victory, but it never truly recognizes the contributions of all groups; especially those who are not currently in power." As another informant (KI-9, 26/05/22) pointed out regarding Anole, "it is seen as a symbol of oppression by the Oromo, but for others, it's just a historical event; this makes discussions impossible." This division illustrates how politicized historical narratives deepen the already existing fractures.

This polarization directly leads to heightened inter-group mistrust. Contradictory narratives reinforce prejudices, leading to deep-seated suspicion. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory explains how group identity can lead to negative perceptions of out-groups. A key informant (KI-12, 15/04/22) expressed this saying: "we cannot trust their narrative because they always twist it to suit their interests." This mistrust impedes dialogue and creates a cycle of negative representations. As Bar-Tal (2000) argues, historical grievances are major causes of intergroup conflict reflecting the endless debates about 'correct' interpretations seen in the interviews.

The study indicates that the perceived bias of the state, especially concerning Adwa victory commemorations, undermines its legitimacy. This aligns with research by Anderson (1983) on the state's role in shaping national narratives. A key informant (KI-13, 27/04/22) noted, "the government's celebration of the victory of Adwa feels like a celebration of one group's dominance, further marginalizing us." This perception is consistent with Scott's (1998) analysis of how a state can alienate groups when it promotes narratives that favor specific interests. Interviews revealed a widespread concern that the government was exploiting historical narratives for political power weakening the national unity.

The lack of a shared understanding, stemming from competing historical narratives, fundamentally challenges the idea of a unified national identity. Smith (1991) highlights the contested nature of national identity formation, and in Ethiopia, the study reveals the struggle between Pan-Ethiopian and ethnic identities. Informant (KI-2, 28/02/22) said, "when they say, 'we all won at Adwa' it ignores the fact that some were forced to participate while others fought for their freedom." Benhabib (2002) shows how narratives can be used both to unify and divide. As this interview reveals, victimhood and heroic narratives are deployed to create group solidarity, but simultaneously lead to exclusion and distrust of others.

The study's finding that differing interpretations hinder social cohesion is well-supported by Pettigrew's (1998) work on intergroup contact theory which shows how historical grievances undermine social cooperation. As one informant (KI-4, 05/03/22) expressed, "we have always been told that we are one, but this historical division makes cooperation impossible." As Gurr (1993) argues, such divisions undermine long-term stability, which is further exacerbated by lack of social cohesion. The key informants' statements confirm a climate of distrust and division (KI-4, 05/03/22).

Last but not least, the study highlights how even historical scholarship is influenced by competing narratives. Foucault (1972) in "The Archaeology of Knowledge" supports this assertion by arguing that knowledge is never neutral and is shaped by power relations. As Trouillot (1995) argues, historical narratives are often used to promote specific interests. One of the key informants (KI-20,

10/01/23) noted, "historians often pick and choose the parts of history that suits their agenda thereby perpetuating the conflict through academic works." These perspectives indicate a lack of objectivity and further emphasize the way biases are perpetuated in the presentation of historical narratives.

To sum up, the competing narratives surrounding the Anole incident and the victory at Adwa illustrate the ongoing challenges of achieving a national consensus in Ethiopia. While the Anole incident underscores the divisive legacy of historical trauma and ethnic tension, the varied interpretations of Adwa reveal the complexities of building a unified national identity. Addressing these challenges requires a conscious effort to foster a more inclusive and critical understanding of history, promoting dialogue and reconciliation across different communities. Ultimately, fostering a national consensus in Ethiopia depends on the ability to transcend the limitations of selective narratives and construct a shared understanding of the past that embraces both the triumphs and the tragedies of all its citizens. This will be the only way to create a truly united nation that values the diversity and contributions of all its people.

The study delves into the contentious and sensitive issue of the Anole incidence and memorial monument which has sparked contradictory interpretations and heated debates among Ethiopian elites precipitating complex historical and political discussions. The Amhara elite, in particular, are deeply sensitive to the historiography of Anole incidence and its implications of the monument perceiving it as "a symbol of distorted historical narratives manufactured by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)."

On the other hand, the Oromo politicians, intellectuals, and activists claim that the Anole memorial monument represents one of the numerous incidences at which the Amhara-Menelikan forces massacred the Oromo. The Oromo elites' reactions to the Amhara elites' claim were very stiff. They interpret the Amhara elites' position of removing the monument as the continuous influence of the Solomonic-Amhara dominant national narratives on Ethiopia's historiography and the quest of demanding legitimate continuity for their Solomonic-Amhara's imagined nationhood.

This informs the profoundly multifaceted and delicate nature of historical interpretations on the history of Anole and their impact on contemporary politics and societal relations; especially, between Amhara and Oromo elites within Ethiopia. The deeply entrenched and conflicting historical and political viewpoints, with distinct interpretations of historical events, perpetuate polarized sentiments between different ethnic groups. This striking contrast in perspectives furthers the complexities of acknowledging and addressing historical injustices and their relevance to contemporary relations among Ethiopia's diverse cultural and national communities.

The victory of Adwa and the way it has been commemorated are the two issues on which competing narratives are reconstructed. The victory of Ethiopians over the Italians at the battle of Adwa was one of the most important historical phenomena that decisively contributed to the existence of the independent Ethiopian state. This historic victory laid the foundation for the African anti-colonial struggles and freedom of black peoples. Indeed, such a national historical event would have been necessary for national identity and nation-building. Unfortunately, however, the victory of Adwa and the *modus operandi* of its commemoration efforts have been sources of historical contradictions, inter-group conflicts, and national discord in Ethiopia. The contradictory and conflicting features regarding the narratives of Adwa are, mainly, manifested among Tigrayan, Oromo, and Amhara politicians and intellectuals.

The divergence in historical narratives surrounding the battle of Adwa among Ethiopia's political elites and intellectuals has fostered contradictory, competing, and conflicting interpretations, ultimately negatively impacting the relations among, particularly, the Amhara, Oromo, and Tigray elites. The Tigrayan elites assert a decisive role in the battle of Adwa, yet distortions in historiography and state narratives have obscured this contribution. The Amhara-Solomonic elites tend to highlight Emperor Menelik II's leadership and unique historical achievements focusing on the Amhara narratives. Conversely, the Oromo elites emphasize the pivotal role of Oromo fighters, particularly the cavalry, and their heroism at Adwa, fostering their own distinctive interpretation. These divergent

perspectives have led to discord and challenge the process of commemorating the Adwa victory for nation-building, peaceful and harmonious relations, shared political vision, development, and shared national identity.

Hence, the competing narratives surrounding the Anole incident and the Adwa victory, as highlighted by this study, pose a significant impediment to achieving national consensus in Ethiopia. The deeply entrenched and conflicting historical interpretations fuel ongoing political polarization and ethnic discord. The instrumentalization of these historical events for political purposes combined with the selective emphasis on specific narratives, prevents a shared understanding of the past and actively undermines efforts toward building a unified national identity.

The failure to acknowledge and reconcile these divergent perspectives perpetuates a cycle of mistrust and animosity, hindering the very possibility of achieving a cohesive national vision, peaceful relations, and shared progress. Ultimately, the findings of this study underscore the critical need for inclusive historical narratives and a commitment to confronting the complexities of the past in order to forge a path towards a more harmonious and unified Ethiopian future.

5. Recommendations

The recommendations of the study offer a crucial and timely call for coordinated efforts among various stakeholders in Ethiopia to address the contentious and divisive narratives surrounding the Adwa victory and the Anole historical events. The involvement of politicians, government, intellectuals, researchers, civic society organizations (National Dialogue Commission and religious institutions), and other concerned bodies is instrumental. Hence, the researcher identified the following recommendations:

Historians and researchers should critically deconstruct existing Amhara-centric narratives of Anole and Adwa by: identifying underlying biases, analyzing source materials, incorporating diverse primary sources (including oral histories and marginalized voices), and examining the influence of power dynamics on narrative construction and dissemination.

The government and political parties should foster the creation of genuinely inclusive and shared narratives on commemorative occasions and events. Through collaborative efforts, they (the government and political parties) should ensure that these narratives encompass diverse viewpoints and experiences, fostering a sense of unity and inclusivity.

The government should utilize inclusive symbolism and commemorative protocols that resonate with various ethnic groups and communities, making collective memory-building more representative. The government should also grant recognition for all iconic figures that played a role in the victory of Adwa through the erection of memorial monuments and building/establishing institutions that acknowledge and celebrate their contributions.

The government, political parties, and CSOs should help initiate and foster national dialogue sessions that bring together a spectrum of stakeholders representing various communities, ethnicities, and perspectives. These conversations should prioritize mutual respect, empathy, and the exchange of historical insights.

National Dialogue Commission should emphasize the importance of inclusivity in mainstreaming and promoting collective narratives. it should ensure that all voices are heard and that efforts towards shaping a unifying national narrative positively impact all concerned parties.

National Dialogue Commission should establish mechanisms for transitional justice to address historical grievances and rectify past injustices, such as the Anole massacre. By acknowledging and redressing historical wrongs, transitional justice initiatives aim to promote healing, reconciliation, and societal cohesion.

Collaboration among civic society organizations, peacebuilding partners, and other relevant stakeholders is paramount. Their involvement can bring diverse perspectives, foster dialogue, and enhance the credibility and inclusivity of the new narrative.

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